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ABSTRACT

While literacy is an important part of anyone's education, it should be noted that visual literacy, being able to view, interpret and react to visuals, is just as important for today's population. College students are reluctant at first to take the time to really examine a picture book, whereas youngsters go over and over their favorite books to see if there is anything new or different in the illustrations that they have overlooked. Childhood may allow for more time to spare on the essentials; college students, on the other hand, have full schedules of diverse demands. However, once college students begin to really examine art work, they do come away more satisfied with their abilities to judge the quality of the art work presented. The hope is that these college students will bring that literacy to their future elementary school students. In responding to illustrations, there are a number of areas of concentration: (1) color; (2) borders; (3) style; and (4) viewing distance. The style with which "Cinderella" is illustrated has a dramatic effect on the reader's understanding of the text. If in Susan Jeffer's "Cinderella," the heroine is beautifully, as she is traditionally taken to be, she is less than attractive, even frumpy, in Barbara Karlin's version of the classic, published in 1989. Similarly, Don Wood, illustrator of "Heckety Peg" (1987), creates an aura of goodness and light whenever the mother of the story is shown. (Contains 23-item bibliography.) (TB)

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# VISUAL LITERACY:

# COLLEGE STUDENTS RESPOND TO PICTURE BOOKS

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# VISUAL LITERACY

## COLLEGE STUDENTS RESPOND TO PICTURE BOOKS

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When I think about how my undergraduate college students respond initially to picture books for all ages and subjects, I immediately call to mind images presented by Lois Lowry in her 1994 Newbery winner The Giver (1993). Lowry created a world full of seemingly simplistic ways to deal with life. This world of the future did not provide for grey areas, questioning, creative or critical thinking. When twelve year old Jonas began to catch glimpses of the color red in an apple and the brilliant copper tones of a little girl's hair, readers become aware that this boy's "ideal" world had no color. Color was not perceived as a needed option. As Jonas progressed with his training as a Receiver of Memory, he saw colors, choices, and noted how people blindly accepted propaganda. To make a difference, he left his world behind to seek something else. He hoped that he could meet the new challenges of a new visual world that would lead him to live a more fulfilled life.

Over the course of a semester, many of my college students change their opinions about children's picture books. They begin to examine and explore a legitimate world of literature and art. They hone their personal perceptions, and through group interaction, and ultimately they ultimately begin to "see" that

picture books can open up a whole world of visual literacy for readers of all ages. They become aware that quality art is indeed alive and well and thriving in the pages of literature for children.

> Many illustrations do indeed accomplish the essential functions of art: to change or intensify one's perception of reality; and thereby to produce a lasting effect on the beholder. In other words, illustrations can perform that originally unsophisticated achievement of allowing heightened perception and information to coexist in a work of art (Kingman 1974, p. 95).

In the beginning of the semester, my college students respond favorably to literature they remembered from childhood: most notably Pat the Bunny (Kunhardt, 1962, 1940), Where the Wild Things Are (1963), Berenstain books, and Richard Scarry books. Their observational skills appear to be limited and as a result they have a tendency to look at pictures rather than being drawn into them. When I re-introduce Where the Wild Things Are, I have students examine just the art work from a distance. Although they have seen and heard this book "millions of times," they previously did not notice how Sendak's illustrations broke out of the borders of a picture on a page; they began to note that the pictures became larger and larger as Max's adventure escalated. This "discovery" usually piqued the attention of most of the class and caused them to think more about illustrations.

Once they looked at an old favorite in a new way, they began to examine illustrations for what they had to add to characterization, action, setting or mood. As a result, my students had to add or readjust their definition of literacy to include the impact of the art work and to include the relevancy of visual literacy in the elementary school program.

> Because we live in such a visually oriented world, comprehension beyond the printed world is becoming increasingly more important. As with the text of a story, pictures carry surface and underlying meaning. Children will delight in the books that provide an experience in literature, art, and graphic detail, leading to an understanding of and use of critical reading of illustrations. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but readers need to know what to look for and how to process the details into useful information before full comprehension and visual literacy can be attained (Storey 1984, p. 58).

Cecil's Story (Lyon, 1991) becomes more personalized in terms of interpreting the illustrations after one has read the words of the artist. George Ella Lyon wrote about a lad who was left with neighbors for three weeks while his mother went to bring his father home from the war front in Civil War days. This story could almost be about any child who has a dad go off to war and lose an arm. However, the uniforms, clothing and the

boy's worry about being able to use the plow, indicate another time frame.

To illustrate the concept of passing time, artist Peter Catalanotto drew pictures of a chicken embryo from conception to a chick hatching out and becoming a yellow fluffy creature. No where in the text is it mentioned that this drawing noted the passing of three weeks time.

One is taken by the water color illustrations that seem to "bleed off the page." Catalanotto noted "I let the paintings drip simply because I thought it was the right feeling for the book. It was [the author] George Ella who pointed out to me that the paint drips represent the blood and tears of war. It's kind of nice--while I'm extending her text, she's extending my paintings!" (Catalanotto 1993, pg. 23).

My students looked at the illustrations with new meaning after reading something written by the artist, especially when there was some interpretative data to discuss. Catalanotto noted "I felt that taking common objects and giving them new meaning and power was the best way to do this. A chair becomes emptiness, an egg represents time, and the sky, emotion" (pg. 23) (Note: My students were first to notice Cecil playing army with toy soldiers on the cover of the book. Interestingly enough, one of the wooden soldiers has one arm, just like Cecil's dad.)

## Developing Visual Literacy

When dealing with the reading of illustrations and the

development of visual literacy, I have noted some areas of importance. First it is it frequently necessary to read/show a book sometimes as many as three times. This redundancy factor allows students to spend time enjoying the book the first go-around and then allow them to deal with the implications of the illustrations after other readings. Secondly, students need think time or wait time between the readings. They need to jot down their initial reactions. Do the illustrations seem to go with the text? Do the illustrations carry more impact than the text? Do the illustrations hinder one's understanding of the text? Thirdly, students need to discuss their findings with others. Exchanges between students lead toward a more well rounded understanding of what was seen. While the same book was shown to all the students, not everyone takes the same information away from the book. Fourthly, of what use is this book in an educational episode with children? Is this a book for pure enjoyment or is this book one that is for enlightenment and study?

When I introduce "mood" as a concept, I frequently share the book Let the Celebration BEGIN! (Wild, 1991). Upon being shown the book's cover, students quickly surmise the story *should* have an upbeat mood in keeping with a holiday or a festive occasion. Students do note, however, that the children on the cover seem to be poverty stricken because their clothing is ragged and torn. Almost immediately their cheery personal moods are sobered when

they realize the story is about children in a German concentration camp during World War II who don't recall having homes or toys. (It is a secret that the ladies in the camp are making scrap toys for the children to receive when friendly soldiers liberate the camp.)

My college students react first in horror quickly noting that this picture book would confuse children about the reality of life in a concentration camp. They feel as though the title, the happy mood of the text, and illustrations that have a lot of pure white space that does not show the violence of a camp are contradictions of terms--positive mood for such an inhumane setting. This book leads toward a more sophisticated discussion of mood compared to many of the picture books that the students had seen in their childhood.

Usually, they have quite a bit of wait time before they begin to speak about the art work. When they do talk, they have something relevant to say. As a result, many a shared comment becomes a very cathartic moment for speakers and listeners alike. Over time, students begin to realize how important a shared response is.

> The term response to literature is used in a variety of ways. Theoretically, response refers to what happens in the mind of the reader or listener as a story or poem unfolds. In this sense, response is personal and private, hidden from the world. In another sense, a response also refers to any outward sign of that activity, something said or done that

reveals a reader's thoughts and feelings about literature (Huck, Hepler, Hickman 1993, pg. 54).

When responding to illustrations there are a number of areas of focus, for example: color, borders, style, and viewing distance (close/far away). The titles mentioned in the text are interesting examples of what children's literature can be used to bring about an awareness of the importance of visual literacy.

A. Style

Versions of fairy tales are a good place to start comparing art work. The retellings are varied, the illustrations are different; the readers respond differently to both. The Cinderella in Barbara Karlin's book Cinderella (1989) contains cartoon illustrations by James Marshall. One is supposed to believe that this less than attractive young lady is going to snare a prince. In some pictures, she is down-right frumpy. The comical illustrations are bold and colorful.

Compared to the book Cinderella (Ehrlich, 1985), illustrated by Susan Jeffers, Cinderella's beauty is undeniable. Jeffers created a waif child who blossomed with the magic bestowed upon her by her fairy god mother. No mistaking who the beauty here is. The art work is detailed; some pictures go outside of their borders making the reader's eyes follow the pictures from page to page.

David Shannon's illustrations for Rafe Martin's retelling of The Rough Face Girl (1992) are dark and foreboding. The

stepsisters aren't ugly in person but they are haughty and unbending. Their sister, the Rough Face Girl, has an inner beauty that can only apply to a true princess. She has nothing to give in terms of physical beauty, but she has a lifetime of knowledge and kindness to share. The comparison of versions of a fairy tale bring viewers into different worlds and it is important that they note details regarding time and culture.

B. Color

In Rose Blanche (Innocenti, Gallaz, 1985), the grim illustrations created by Roberto Innocenti compliment the story about a German child who goes hungry so she can give all her food to Jewish children in a concentration camp. The only bright pictures in the book show the clearing where Rose Blanche was killed in a military cross fire. Time passed and the clearing became alive with flowers and other growing things. A renewed spring and sense of hope was shown making this place no longer part of a war. It is difficult to imagine how such a once terrible scene could be so serene at another time.

Dark and light colors are effectively employed in Heckety Peg (Wood, 1987) illustrated by Don Wood. Whenever the mother in the story is shown, there is an aura of goodness and light. Viewers feel comforted by the sight of her with her children. In contrast, whenever the witch is shown, the colors are dark, cautionary and forecast evil. Viewers sense the unrest in the illustrations and want to warn the children about their impending doom. Color is definitely a way for an illustrator to punctuate

the interpretation of the text. Color can convey meaning that goes beyond the text.

C. Borders

Frequently borders that surround text or illustrations go unnoticed. They appear to "just" be part of the page. However, upon closer examination, readers will catch a humorous mood when they associate the quilt designs that border each page of Sam Johbnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt (Ernst, 1983). Sam wants to join the women's quilting club and the ladies don't want him around. The quilting pattern that surrounds that page is the "shoo fly." When Sam puts up flyers for men to join a men's quilting club, the quilt pattern edging the page is the "trumpet vine." (Border quilting patters are listed on the last page for those who aren't familiar with quilting.)

In Jan Brett's adaptation of The Mitten (1989), a little boy loses a mitten that his grandmother had just knitted. He tramps here and there through the snow to find his mitten. The mitten turns out to be a haven for all sorts of woodsy creatures. Foreshadowing is included in the border by showing which animal will join the others in the main illustration. Thus there appears to be almost a two leveled story: one in the text and main pictures and another in the borders.

D. Viewing From a Distance

Some picture books aren't meant to be minutely examined. They need to be seen from a distance to get the full impact of the art work. Ed Young has been very successful in imbedding

images of good and evil in two of the books he has illustrated. In Yeh Shen: A Cinderella Story from China (Louie, 1982), Young drew pastel, quiet panels to accompany the text. Upon first glance, the art work shows just what is going in the story. However, when seen from a distance, viewers can detect that fish have been incorporated into clothing designs and scenery. The fish in this story is important in that it gives Yeh Shen the magic she needs to conquer the evils in her life.

In Lon Po Po: A Red-Riding Hood Story From China (1989). Young's illustrations are dark and dangerous. They should be so because the children are left on their own when mother goes out of town. When seen from a distance, viewers notice that the big bad wolf is part of the scenery. In one spread, the tip of his nose is the cliff, his snout is the land and closed eyes and ears are the depressions in the ground. The wolf is ever-present, whether the main focus of the illustration or the imbedded figure.

In The Trek (1985) Ann Jonas wrote an innocuous story about a little girl's walk to school. While the story is pedestrian, the figures that are imbedded in the main illustrations are interesting. When viewed from afar, it is easier to see how alligator has become the front walk of a house, how sheep are the bushes and how a tiger dozes in the flowers. If a reader isn't sufficiently visually literate, there is a section in the back of the book that shows and names all the animals and insects that have been hidden in the illustrations.

E. Viewed Closely

Some books need to be hand held and not shared from a distance. A favorite close up book is Ellen Raskin's Nothing Ever Happens on My Block (1974). In the foreground, Chester Filbert sits on the curb and laments that nothing goes on in his neighborhood. Meanwhile behind him a parade goes by, a witch appears in different windows of a Victorian house, and a parachutist drops out of the sky. Each little event needs to be seen up close in order to capture the full humor of the book.

Rain Makes Applesauce (Scheer, 1964), a 1963 Caldecott Honor book, is creatively shown to be a story about planting a seed, having a tree grow and finally making apple sauce. However, there is non traditional placement of text, pictures that intertwine and minute details that add to the viewer's interest in the book. This would be lost if the reader had to see the book from afar.

Black and White (Macaulay, 1990), the 1991 Caldecott Medal winner, is the telling of four distinct yet related stories. One needs to focus on one story, then another, then another, then another. After looking at all the pictures, the reader comes away with the parts seemingly making up more the whole. Students have frequently responded "Oh, now I get it!" when they finish reading the entire book.

Readers of all ages will be taken in by the "Miss Frizzle" books. She is an unusual teacher who takes her class on trips in several different books. In The Magic School Bus On the Ocean

Floor (1992) each page is crammed with information. One needs to read the book at least four times to get the full impact. First readers could cover the descriptive text in the white boxes. Then they could peruse the facts that are printed on lined yellow school paper. Then they could read the dialogue bubbles. Finally readers could search around to find the labels on things that need to be identified. For a visual treat, observe the changes in Miss Frizzle's clothing. She has a wardrobe for any educational setting.

My Place (1992) will be of particular interest to American readers inasmuch as it takes place in Australia. Another interesting feature is that the text starts in 1988 and goes backward in increments of decades to a time when Aborigines lived on the land without the intervention of the white settler. Visually of import are the maps that are drawn and detailed for anyone interested in how the passage of time has changed an area. The maps are useful to show how people congregate and how they use the land.

It is important to note that there are books specifically designed for children to look closely at the illustrations to find hidden objects or to find clues that will assist them in discovering a picture's meaning. Usually, such books are for the very young and do not contain a lot of text that the illustrations need to match with or extend.

## Conclusion

While literacy is an important part of anyone's education,

it should be noted that visual literacy, being able to view , interpret and react to visuals, is just as important for today's population. I have found that my college students are reluctant at first to take the time to really examine a picture book. I have seen youngsters go over and over their favorite books to see if there is anything new or different in the illustrations that they had overlooked. I guess that childhood allows for more time to spare on the essentials while college students have a full schedule of diverse demands. I have noted that once they do begin to really examine the art work, they do come away more satisfied with their abilities to judge the quality of art work presented. I am confident that my students will become more visually literate over time and I am sure that they will carry this knowledge into the elementary classroom.

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